United Nations HRI/CORE/BLR/2015

International Human Rights Instruments

Distr.: General
18 January 2016
English
Original: Russian

Common core document forming part of the reports of States parties

Belarus*

[20 November 2015]

* In accordance with the information transmitted to States parties regarding the processing of their reports, the present document was not formally edited before being sent to the United Nations translation services.

GE.16-00542 (E) 050416 050416
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I. General information about the Republic of Belarus

A. Geographical situation

1. The Republic of Belarus is situated in the eastern part of Europe and has borders with Lithuania and Latvia to the north, Ukraine to the south, the Russian Federation to the east and Poland to the west.

2. Its territory covers an area of 207,600 square kilometres. The distance from north to south is 560 kilometres (350 miles) and from east to west 650 kilometres (460 miles).

3. The territorial administrative units are provinces, districts, rural councils, cities and towns, in which local councils of deputies and executive and administrative bodies are established.

4. Belarus has six provinces, whose capitals are Minsk, Brest, Viciebsk, Homieĺ, Hrodna and Mahilioŭ. The country has more than 100 cities, 13 of which have a population of more than 100,000.

5. The capital is the city of Minsk.

B. Constitutional, political and legal structure of the State

6. Belarus is a unitary democratic social State governed by the rule of law. The President of the Republic is the Head of State and guarantor of the Constitution and of human and civil rights and freedoms.

7. State power is exercised in accordance with the principle of its division into the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

8. Legislative power is exercised by the National Assembly (Parliament), which comprises two chambers — the House of Representatives (the lower house) and the Council of the Republic (the upper house).

9. The President and the deputies of the House of Representatives are elected on the basis of universal, free, equal and direct suffrage, by secret ballot. The Council of the Republic is formed by the election of eight members from each province and the city of Minsk. Eight members of the Council of the Republic are appointed by the President of the Republic.

10. A National People's Assembly is convened in order to give effect to citizens' constitutional right to participate in decisions on matters of State. It convenes once every five years. The participants in the Assembly are elected from the provinces and the city of Minsk. The Head of State reports to the Assembly, which is competent to adopt national five-year development plans and to take decisions on the most important issues for the country's development. In fact, the Assembly is a form of supplementary public scrutiny of the President's actions. The fourth National People's Assembly was convened in December 2010.

11. Executive power is exercised by the country's Government, the Council of Ministers, which is the central organ of State power. In its activities, the Government is accountable to the President and responsible before Parliament. The Prime Minister is appointed by the President with the agreement of the Chamber of Representatives.

12. The courts hold judicial power. The judicial system consists of the Constitutional Court, which is the body that exercises judicial oversight of the constitutionality of national

laws and regulations and exercises judicial authority through constitutional proceedings; the ordinary courts, which administer justice through civil, criminal, administrative and economic proceedings; and the commercial courts, which administer justice through commercial and administrative proceedings. The system of ordinary courts is based on the principles of territoriality and specialization.

13. In accordance with the Constitution, the individual, his or her rights and freedoms and guarantees of the implementation of those rights are the supreme value and goal of society and the State. The Constitution establishes:

- A comprehensive system of legal guarantees and specific legal procedures for protecting and promoting civil rights, including the defence of rights and freedoms before the courts;
- The liability of government bodies, officials and other persons entrusted with the discharge of State functions for acts that violate the rights and freedoms of the individual;
- The right to file a judicial appeal against decisions of local Councils of Deputies, executive or administrative bodies that restrict or violate the rights, freedoms or lawful interests of citizens, and in other cases provided for by law;
- The right, in accordance with the international legal instruments ratified by Belarus, to have recourse to international organizations for the defence of rights and freedoms, provided that all available domestic remedies have been exhausted;
- The right to seek legal assistance with the implementation and protection of rights and freedoms, including the right to avail oneself of the assistance of a lawyer or other representatives at any time before a court or in national or local government bodies, enterprises, institutions, organizations or voluntary associations and in relations with officials and other persons;
- The right to sue for damages for material and moral injury in order to defend rights, freedoms, honour and dignity.

14. The State system for protecting human rights encompasses authorities and officials responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights.

15. The President is the guarantor of the Constitution and of human and civil rights and freedoms. He or she adopts practical measures to defend and guarantee civil rights by issuing laws and making decisions on specific issues. The Head of State coordinates action to protect and promote human rights with the three branches of power, with the support of civil society institutions and the public.

16. The National Assembly (Parliament) plays a special role in the State's legal machinery for defending human rights and freedoms in that it considers and adopts laws and establishes legal mechanisms ensuring the de facto observance and defence of civil rights and freedoms. Members of Parliament may likewise, in their individual capacity, introduce private bills to secure the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of the electorate. The National Assembly has a standing commission on human rights, community relations and the media, which has a clear mandate to address issues relating to the observance and protection of civil rights and to ensure that appropriate heed is paid to human rights in all aspects of Parliament's work.

C. Economic, social and cultural characteristics

17. Throughout its history, Belarus has been subjected to violence from outside and destructive wars, and its territory has been incorporated into various States. Some 30 per

cent of the population lost their lives during the Second World War and the country's infrastructure was almost entirely destroyed.

18. Almost a quarter of its territory was contaminated by radioactive fallout from the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, which has had a lasting adverse impact on the country's economy and on the health of its population.

19. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the country's transition to a market economy, the economic and social situation of Belarusian citizens deteriorated.

20. The Government still needs to take the aforementioned factors into account when formulating national policy with regard to the protection and promotion of citizens' economic, social and cultural rights.

21. Despite the long-term obstacles, the key ongoing benchmark for socioeconomic development in Belarus is the attainment of social objectives associated with consistent improvements in living standards and quality of life, poverty reduction and creation of the necessary conditions for increased public prosperity in the future.

22. The fact that Belarus has achieved a number of the Millennium Development Goals (the eradication of poverty, the provision of primary education and the equality of men and women) before the deadline, the high level of human development and the political, socioeconomic and inter-ethnic stability in the country are evidence of the results achieved.

23. The rapid rate of growth in per capita income in the first decade of the twenty-first century has made it possible to reduce the number of people on low incomes from 46.7 per cent of the population in 1999 to 5.2 per cent in 2010.

24. Belarus is ranked fifty-third out of 187 countries in the human development index published in 2014, retaining its position among countries with a high level of human development and outperforming the other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

25. Against the background of the unstable global economic situation, budgetary policy in Belarus has retained its social focus.

26. The social safeguards under the model of development used in the country are as follows:

- Guarantees of the right to employment as the most worthy means of ensuring a person's self-esteem and his or her economic, moral and social sustenance;
- Guarantees of a fair share of remuneration for the economic results of citizens' work, but not below the level necessary to ensure an independent and decent existence for themselves and their families;
- Guarantees of the equality of men and women in education and employment;
- Guarantees of the right to health care, including free treatment in State health-care institutions;
- Guarantees of the right of young people to mental, moral and physical development;
- Guarantees of the right to social security in old age and illness and on other grounds.

27. One of the key ways of ensuring effective social development is to increase employment. As at 1 October 2015, the level of unemployment was 1 per cent of the economically active population.

28. Unemployment among women and young people has been falling for a long time.

29. The State provides additional guarantees with regard to employment for particularly needy or vulnerable groups, including parents of large or broken families; persons under the age of 21 looking for their first job; persons with disabilities; and persons released from places of detention. Additional guarantees include measures such as the reservation of jobs for certain groups of people and the implementation of vocational training and retraining programmes in accordance with the latest trends in the labour market.

30. State social support for the population is the most important component of the country's social and economic policy. Since 2007, the principle of targeting has been used in the provision of State support. This approach, which is enshrined in legislation, makes it possible to apply a clear and transparent mechanism for the provision of targeted State social assistance to those who really need it.

31. Effective targeted social support means focusing limited resources on meeting the needs of socially vulnerable sectors of the population. It involves a transition from general social programmes to targeted programmes addressing the needs of specific population sectors and groups and also of particular regions.

32. The Government's top priority with regard to social welfare is to care for families and children, in particular to enable families to fulfil their economic, reproductive, educational, cultural and psychological functions, and to protect the right of children to full physical, intellectual, moral and social development.

33. The State system of financial assistance to families with children includes cash payments when children are born and for their maintenance and upbringing (benefits and pensions); social services; and employment, tax and other benefits.

34. Particular attention is paid to the inhabitants of rural areas, who are more vulnerable than others to hardship, such as poorly developed social infrastructure, transport and everyday services. The task is to implement State social standards throughout the country while ensuring that regional characteristics are taken into account. The purpose of implementing social standards is to improve social welfare.

35. One of the priorities of social policy in Belarus is pension provision. Because of the current demographic structure of the population and the Government's substantial social obligations with regard to pension payments, more than 28.4 per cent of the population currently receives a pension. In recent years, government expenditure on pensions has amounted to more than 9 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

36. Improvement of the health-care system and the instilling of healthy lifestyle habits among the population are of fundamental importance in the country's social policy. The health-care system remains State-run; the private sector provides around 15 per cent of medical services. Belarus has one of the highest levels of expenditure on health care of all the CIS countries: approximately 4 per cent of GDP.

37. The development of advanced technologies in Belarus and their global profile have been significantly boosted by the organization of national centres for applied research, where there is a close link between science and practice, which makes it easier to translate scientific developments rapidly into health-care practice. There are 16 scientific research organizations in Belarus, including 13 national centres for applied research. High-tech medical care has also been introduced in the regions.

38. Education is the most important foundation for the development of the individual, society and the State. Average annual expenditure on education in Belarus during the period 2010-2013 was 4-5 per cent of GDP.

39. Citizens of Belarus are entitled to free preschool, general secondary, vocational, special and supplementary adult education in State educational institutions; specialized

secondary and higher education, in cases where the student is receiving funding from national and/or local budgets for the first time, and postgraduate education are provided free of charge on a competitive basis.

40. Particular attention is paid to ensuring that all sectors of society have access to high-quality education.

41. Quantitative indicators of educational attainment, such as the literacy rate and the number of pupils and students, consistently place Belarus among the top countries in the world in terms of United Nations indicators: the literacy rate among those aged 15 and over is 99.6 per cent, and 100 per cent of the population aged 6 to 21 inclusive is in primary, general basic, general secondary, vocational, specialized secondary or higher education.

42. In Belarus, the necessary conditions have been created for the comprehensive cultural and creative development of the individual, access to cultural assets, the establishment of aesthetic values, the development of people's talents and the preservation of historical and cultural heritage.

43. According to data from the population census of 2009, 83.7 per cent of the inhabitants of Belarus are Belarusian and 13.9 per cent represent about 140 other nationalities and ethnic groups, including Russians (8.3 per cent), Poles (3.1 per cent), Ukrainians (1.7 per cent) and Jews (0.1 per cent).

44. The State languages of Belarus are Belarusian and Russian.

45. Belarus is a multi-confessional State, in which the absolute majority (94.5 per cent) of the population belong to one of several confessions. Of those, 84.5 per cent are Orthodox Christians, 12.5 per cent are Catholics, and 3 per cent belong to other religions. The remaining 5.5 per cent do not classify themselves as followers of any religion.

D. Demographic situation

46. According to assessments by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Belarus is among the countries with low rates of child and infant mortality. The rates of child and infant mortality in Belarus are lower than in other CIS countries and a number of European countries. In 2014, the mortality rate among children under the age of 5 was close to the level of economically developed countries, at 4.4 deaths per 1,000 live births. The infant mortality rate was 3.5 per 1,000 births.

47. In 2014, the maternal mortality rate was 1 per 100,000 live births, with deaths resulting from complications of pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period; this rate is comparable to that in developed countries. The reduction in maternal mortality is due not only to improved safety in pregnancy and childbirth but also to a drop in the number of abortions.

48. Demographic issues are particularly relevant to Belarus because of the large population loss during the Second World War and the consequences of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

49. Belarus has entered the twenty-first century with negative demographic trends: a shrinking and ageing population.

50. As at 1 January 2015, the population of Belarus was 9,480,868, of whom 77.3 per cent lived in towns and cities and 22.7 per cent in rural areas.

51. Women make up more than 53 per cent of the country's population. For every 1,000 men there are 1,150 women.

52. However, the population breakdown by gender differs significantly between urban and rural areas. In urban settlements, women outnumber men from the age of 29 onwards, while in rural areas they outnumber men from the age of 59. This is because of the processes of industrialization and urbanization, which lead women, particularly young women, to migrate from rural to urban areas.

53. In 2014, there were 118,534 births in Belarus, and the overall birth rate was 12.5 per 1,000 population.

54. The overall fertility rate is 1.696 children per woman. The rate needed merely to replace the population is 2.15.

55. Life expectancy at birth rose from 70.4 years in 2010 to 73.2 years in 2014. Life expectancy for men is 67.8 years and for women 78.4 years.

56. A national demographic security programme for 2011-2015 has been implemented. In light of the current demographic situation and the forecast demographic trends, a State programme entitled "The Health of the Nation and Demographic Security, 2016-2020" has been drafted with a view to stabilizing the population and increasing life expectancy.

II. General framework for the protection and promotion of human rights

A. Acceptance of international human rights norms

57. Belarus, as one of the founding States of the United Nations, is a party to most of the international human rights instruments. In accordance with its Constitution, Belarus recognizes the precedence of the universally recognized principles of international law and ensures that its legislation is consistent with them.

58. The universally recognized rights and standards in the field of human rights have been comprehensively strengthened by means of the relevant legislation, including the Voluntary Associations Act, the Act on the Legal Situation of Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons, the Act on the Granting of Refugee Status and Subsidiary and Temporary Protection to Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in Belarus, the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations Act, and the Rights of the Child Act.

59. State legislation in the process of being adopted is subject to a mandatory legal review of its compliance with the Constitution and with the international agreements to which Belarus is a party. The Constitutional Court carries out a mandatory preliminary review to decide, before they are signed by the President, whether laws adopted by Parliament are in conformity with the Constitution and international legal instruments.

Main international human rights agreements and protocols thereto	*Date of ratification*	*Declaration/reservation*
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966	Ratified on 12 November 1973	No
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	Ratified on 12 November 1973	No
Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	Accession on 30 September 1992	No

Main international human rights agreements and protocols thereto	*Date of ratification*	*Declaration reservation*
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965	Ratified on 8 April 1969	Reservation to article 17 (1) withdrawn
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979	Ratified on 4 February 1981	No
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, concerning individual complaints and inquiry procedures, 1999	Ratified on 3 February 2004	No
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984	Ratified on 13 March 1987	Reservations to article 30 (1), and article 20 withdrawn
Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989	Ratified on 1 October 1990	No
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, 2000	Accession on 25 January 2006	Declaration under article 3
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, 2000	Accession on 23 January 2002	No
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Accession on 28 September 2015	No

60. Belarus has ratified 49 International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, 42 of which, including all 8 core conventions, have entered into force. The country is also a party to the Hague Conventions on international humanitarian law, the 1949 Geneva Conventions on the protection of victims of war and the Additional Protocols thereto.

61. Belarus participates actively in the negotiation of international human rights agreements at the regional level, particularly within the context of CIS, and is a party to the CIS Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the Convention of CIS Member States on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

B. Legal framework for the protection of human rights at the national level

62. Belarus has established a legal and regulatory framework that is consistent with the relevant international human rights norms. In addition to the Constitution, the following instruments cover issues of human rights protection: the Civil Code, the Code of Civil Procedure, the Code of Economic Procedure, the Housing Code, the Electoral Code, the Labour Code, the Criminal Code, the Tax Code, the Penal Enforcement Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, the Marriage and Family Code, the Code on the Judicial System and

the Status of Judges, the Code of Administrative Offences, the Code of Administrative Procedure and Enforcement, the Rights of the Child Act and a number of other laws.

63. An important element of the system of human rights protection is the Citizens' and Legal Entities' Appeals Act, which is aimed at comprehensive and systematic regulation of the procedure for the exercise by individuals and legal entities of their right to submit communications to government bodies and other organizations with a view to defending their rights, freedoms and/or lawful interests.

64. The Act sets out the legal framework for the regulation of appeals from individuals and legal entities to government bodies and other organizations, the rights and obligations of applicants, the procedure for submitting written and oral communications, the procedure for arranging private meetings, representation at the time of submission of communications, time frames for the consideration of communications, and the specifics of considering particular types of communication, such as collective, anonymous or repeat communications, comments and suggestions entered in the comments and suggestions book, and electronic communications.

65. Departments for the processing of appeals from individuals operate in government bodies at all levels. All government bodies and organizations and individual employers have introduced comments and suggestions books and have created a uniform system for analysis of and response to public opinion on the work of government bodies and organizations and individual employers.

66. Private meetings and visits by officials from government bodies are widely used throughout the country as a means of dealing with appeals from individuals, as are telephone hotlines.

67. A network of specialized public institutions, through which a constructive partnership has been forged between the State and civil society, operates in Belarus to protect and promote various categories of human rights. It consists of:

- The National Commission on the Rights of the Child;
- The National Council on Gender Policy;
- The Inter-Ethnic Advisory Council;
- The National Council on Labour and Social Affairs;
- The National Interdepartmental Council on Disability;
- The Interdepartmental Commission on the Elderly, Veterans and Victims of War, within the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare;
- The Council on the Improvement of Social and Labour Legislation;
- The Community Coordinating Council on the Media.

68. The justice system is an important element in the protection of human rights. Judicial proceedings are highly democratic owing to the implementation in practice of procedural principles such as the independence of the courts, transparency, due process, adversarial process, the equality of the parties and impartiality.

69. A legal reform has been implemented to improve the judicial system, guarantee harmonized judicial practice, improve the quality of justice dispensed and further develop the system of specialized courts and judges. As of 1 January 2014, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Economic Court have been merged into a single supreme judicial body that deals with civil, criminal, administrative and economic affairs: the Supreme Court, which heads the system of courts of general jurisdiction, into which general and economic courts have been absorbed. The single system of courts of general jurisdiction works well, and

guarantees the autonomy and independence of the judiciary as the fundamental guarantor of civil rights and freedoms.

70. Interference in judges' administration of justice is prohibited and is punishable by law, including criminal law. The independence of judges is secured by the statutory procedure for appointing them.

71. The Constitutional Court protects citizens' constitutional rights and freedoms and ascertains the constitutionality of laws and regulations.

72. The right to judicial protection is universal in nature and is implemented through the courts of general jurisdiction. There is also an increasing number of alternatives for conflict resolution. Thus, the Arbitration Tribunals Act was adopted in 2011 and the Mediation Act in 2013. In cases of an economic nature, individuals may also apply to the International Court of Arbitration attached to the Belarusian Chamber of Commerce. Labour conflicts may be addressed in the conciliation, mediation and arbitration bodies.

73. The Procurator's Office oversees the correct and uniform application of laws, decrees and other regulatory instruments by national government bodies and other government organizations under the Council of Ministers, but also by local representative and executive bodies, voluntary associations, religious and other organizations, officials and other citizens, including individual entrepreneurs.

74. Pursuant to article 1 of the Procurator's Office Act, the Procurator's Office is established as a single centralized system of bodies that oversees the correct and uniform application of laws and regulations within Belarus on behalf of the Government and also performs other statutory functions.

75. Political parties and voluntary organizations are an important element of the Belarusian political system, as they have extensive opportunities to participate in the life of society and the State.

76. There is an ever-increasing number of registered voluntary associations in Belarus. As at 1 October 2015, 15 political parties and 1,126 party organizations, 37 trade unions and 22,937 trade union organizations, and 2,651 voluntary associations, including 225 international, 713 national and 1,713 local ones, were registered in Belarus.

C. Framework within which human rights are promoted at the national level

1. The right to a decent standard of living

77. Expenditure on overcoming the adverse social, economic, cultural and other impacts of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant amounts to US$ 1 million per day, or US$ 730 per resident of the contaminated area. Since the accident, the State has spent approximately US$ 20 billion in total on needs occasioned by Chernobyl.

78. At present more than 1,100,000 people, or 12.1 per cent of the country's population, live in the 2,383 communities situated in zones contaminated by radioactive fallout.

79. The Government is carrying out social, economic and ecological rehabilitation in the contaminated area in an effort to create the necessary conditions to permit economic activity to take place without restrictions imposed by radiation and to achieve a further reduction in the health risk faced by the affected population.

80. Despite the long-term obstacles stemming from the aftermath of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, the Government is pursuing a consistent policy of securing a decent standard of living for the population.

81. In the global ranking of gross national income per capita, which is an indicator of living standards, Belarus was placed sixty-sixth in 2013 and first among the CIS countries.

82. The necessary conditions have been created for the comprehensive cultural and creative development of the individual and access to cultural assets. Belarus has 28 State theatres and around 157 museums and hosts a large number of international and national festivals. Persons with disabilities, war veterans, orphans and children with special physical or psychological needs are entitled to free entry to State exhibitions, displays and museums. One in every three inhabitants of Belarus uses public libraries. There is one public library per 3,100 inhabitants. This figure meets the standards set by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

83. According to data from a sample household survey, 57.1 per cent of households had access to the Internet from a computer in the home in 2014. A total of 98.5 per cent of schools have Internet access.

2. The right to work

84. The Belarusian Constitution guarantees the right to work as the most worthy means of ensuring a person's self-esteem. Realization of the constitutional right to work is guaranteed by respect for the voluntary nature of work (free, voluntary agreement between worker and employer on the labour contract), equal opportunities for employment for all citizens (free choice of profession, type of employment and work), regardless of sex, ethnic origin, age, social status or faith. Labour relations between employee and employer are regulated by the Labour Code.

85. The system of remuneration in force in Belarus ensures that staff are paid adequately for their work, in accordance with the complexity, quantity, quality and conditions of work, their level of qualifications and their position or occupation.

86. Pursuant to article 42 of the Constitution, women and men, adults and minors, all have the right to equal remuneration for work of equal value. A minimum wage (monthly and hourly) is established under Belarusian labour law as the minimum State social standard with regard to remuneration for work in normal conditions, for a normal length of working time, provided that the worker's duties resulting from legislation, local laws and regulations and the labour contract are met.

87. The right to leisure is guaranteed in the form of 24 days of basic annual leave. The duration of basic leave is mandatory for all employers.

88. In order to prevent abuses by employers, the Labour Code, which was drawn up with the participation of foreign experts, provides workers with guarantees against unjustified refusal of employment and dismissal, including on grounds of discrimination, and provides for safe working conditions.

89. Measures designed to offer additional protection of workers' labour rights give trade unions the right to carry out public scrutiny of employers' compliance with the law on labour, labour protection and trade unions and their fulfilment of collective contracts and agreements.

90. The State provides additional guarantees of the implementation of the right to work for socially vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. It runs programmes to boost national employment and promotes youth employment.

91. The number of disabled persons in employment rose from 26 per cent of those in need of work in 1995 to 40.8 per cent in 2014. Approximately 5,500 persons with disabilities apply for assistance with finding employment to the labour, employment and social protection agencies each year. In the first nine months of 2015, 3,700 disabled

persons seeking employment were registered with labour, employment and social welfare agencies. A total of 1,400 disabled persons were helped to find jobs. About half of those posts were jobs reserved by the Government for disabled people. In 2011-2015, a total of 10,200 jobs were reserved for persons with disabilities, and almost 4,000 disabled persons were recruited to such jobs. During that period, 1,500 disabled persons were sent for vocational training.

92. The National Council on Labour and Social Affairs has been set up to ensure cooperation between the Government, national employers' associations and trade unions on the implementation of socioeconomic policy and the protection of citizens' labour rights and economic and social interests.

3. The right to social security

93. A national model of State social support for the population has been established and successfully developed over the years since Belarus became independent.

94. With a view to securing the rights and improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups, including disabled people, the elderly and persons on low incomes, the Social Welfare of Disabled Persons Act, the Prevention of Disability and Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons Act, the Veterans Act, the Act on State Social Benefits, Rights and Guarantees for Particular Categories of Citizens and the Social Services Act have been adopted and a number of special government programmes have been implemented.

95. A comprehensive programme of social services for the period 2011-2015 and a State programme for 2011-2015 to create a barrier-free living environment for the physically disabled are currently being implemented.

96. Since 2001, the principle of targeting has been used in the provision of State support to the population. This approach, which has been enshrined in legislation since 2007, makes it possible to apply a clear and transparent mechanism for the provision of targeted State social assistance to those who really need it.

97. Belarus has a wide network of institutions offering social services, including local social service centres and homes for elderly persons, persons with disabilities and children with physical or mental disabilities.

98. Social support for families is one of the key aspects of government social policy and one of the foundations of demographic development. It is aimed primarily at improving the quality of life of families with children, strengthening the moral foundations of the family and raising the profile of the family in society.

99. Belarusian families with children are entitled to labour and employment guarantees, housing, tax, medical and educational benefits, and financial support in the form of State benefits.

100. The lump-sum benefit paid on the birth of a child has doubled since 2011 and is now 10 times the average per capita minimum subsistence allowance for the first child, and 14 times the allowance for the second and subsequent children. The allowance for children up to the age of 3 years has been progressively increased to 35 per cent of the average monthly wage for the first child, 40 per cent for the second and subsequent children, and 45 per cent for children with disabilities. Since 2015, if a family has children aged between 3 and 18 years as well as a child aged under 3 years, it receives a new allowance equal to 50 per cent of the minimum subsistence allowance. The amount of the allowances is reviewed on a quarterly basis in relation to changes in the minimum subsistence allowance and average wages. "Family capital" was introduced on 1 January 2015. This provides a one-time non-cash transfer of US$ 10,000 to families on the birth or adoption of their third child or

subsequent children. All children under the age of 3 years qualify for free medicines (according to the list of approved medicines).

101. Low-income families with children who are minors are entitled to State support in the form of targeted social assistance.

102. The State provides support to large families by settling debts on preferential loans issued for the construction, renovation or acquisition of housing. Support has been increased to 75 per cent of the amount of the debt for families with three children and 100 per cent for those with four children. On the birth of the second or subsequent children, repayments of loans and interest are suspended for the period that one of the parents is caring for a child under the age of 3 years.

103. Young families and large families are provided with financial support to settle debts on non-preferential loans issued for these purposes. Labour legislation provides for the equal participation of both parents in family life and a balance between parental and work commitments.

104. In particular, childcare leave without loss of employment is available to both mothers and fathers or another relative of the child until the child reaches the age of 3.

105. There are a number of other labour guarantees for employees with family commitments; for example, mothers or fathers of large families or those raising a disabled child are entitled to one day of leave per week, paid at the rate of the average wage.

106. Where the mother or, in place of the mother, the father or guardian of a child under the age of 3 returns to work before or after completing childcare leave, the employer is obliged, with the consent of the person concerned, to extend the contract or to conclude a new contract for a period extending at least until the child reaches the age of 5.

107. Labour law, in conjunction with guarantees on the employment of pregnant women, contains provisions protecting women from unjustified dismissal because of pregnancy. There is a provision for transferring pregnant women and women with children under the age of one and a half to lighter work. The recruitment of pregnant women for night work is prohibited.

108. The Constitution guarantees the right of citizens to a pension in old age or in the event of disability or loss of breadwinner.

109. The basis of the State pension system in Belarus is compulsory State social or pension insurance for employees and self-employed persons (entrepreneurs and others). In certain circumstances specified by law, occupational pensions for old age, disability or loss of breadwinner or social pensions (minimum State guarantees) are paid. The main legal requirements for the payment of an old-age pension are that the person in question must have reached pensionable age (60 for men and 55 for women) and must have been working and paying contributions for at least 15 years (or at least 5 years in the case of vulnerable groups, such as women who have given birth to and brought up five or more children and parents of children with disabilities).

110. Pensions are periodically increased or adjusted to increases in the average wage and changes in the minimum subsistence level.

111. Government pension policy is aimed at maintaining the purchasing power of pensions while preserving the stability of the national pension system.

4. The right to health care

112. Creation of the conditions for citizens' full enjoyment of the right to health care is the primary aim of government health policy. Belarusian citizens are guaranteed the right to

free medical assistance in State health-care institutions on the basis of the minimum State social standards for health care.

113. In order to attain the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, the Belarusian Government is financing a number of programmes to maintain and improve public health and to develop health care:

- A national demographic security programme for 2011-2015;
- A government programme to prevent HIV infection for 2011-2015;
- A government cardiology programme for 2011-2015;
- A government programme of national action for the prevention and alleviation of drunkenness and alcoholism for 2011-2015;
- A subprogramme on improving health and the quality of medical services under the socioeconomic development programme for 2011-2015;
- A subprogramme on preventing disability and rehabilitating persons with disabilities under the comprehensive programme for the development of social services for 2011-2015.

114. Targeted efforts are under way in Belarus to achieve and maintain high levels of immunization coverage under the national immunization schedule.

115. In 2014, immunization coverage among children was more than 98 per cent, and among persons over the age of 18 years, it was more than 99 per cent, which exceeds the 95 per cent level recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).

116. The maternal mortality rate has fallen to 1 per 100,000 live births.

117. In 2014, Belarus was ranked twenty-fifth out of 179 countries and first among the CIS countries in an index compiled by Save the Children of the best places for a child to be born.

118. Belarus is one of the top 10 countries in the world in terms of the survival rate of children with onco-haematological diseases.

119. There has been a steady improvement in the quality of drinking water in terms of sanitary and chemical standards, and special tests have shown that the microbiological content of drinking water has stabilized at less than 1 per cent.

120. As at 1 January 2015, 17,522 HIV-positive persons were registered in Belarus, a prevalence of 100.4 per 100,000 population. Young people aged 15-19 accounted for 24.5 per cent of HIV-positive persons in 1996, a figure which fell to 0.7 per cent in 2014. The principles of confidentiality and respect for human rights and freedoms are observed when providing medical assistance to persons living with HIV.

121. According to data in the 2010 review by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) of the situation of HIV/AIDS around the world, Belarus outperforms all the CIS countries and several Western and Central European countries on a number of major indicators related to combating HIV/AIDS.

5. The right to education

122. The Constitution guarantees the right of Belarusian citizens to receive free general and vocational secondary education. Every year Belarus spends about 2.5 per cent of GDP on funding for education.

123. The literacy rate in Belarus is one of the highest in the world and stands at 99.6 per cent among adults and 99.8 per cent among young people.

124. With a view to the further development of social relations in the field of education, the Education Code of Belarus has been adopted. As a result, Belarus is in fact the first country in the world to have solved not only the practical but also the theoretical problem of codifying education law.

125. The system of preschool education makes it possible to provide those services to practically all those who need them. The percentage of children aged 3 to 6 attending preschool establishments is 96.7 per cent (70.5 per cent in rural areas) — one of the highest rates among the CIS countries. One hundred per cent of children aged 5 are in preschool education, which is free and includes educational care services, medical services and counselling for children.

126. All citizens now receive 11 years of compulsory education: basic education followed by transfer to general secondary education.

127. Belarus has 3,233 general secondary education institutions with 965,000 pupils. The network of general educational establishments includes 216 secondary schools specializing in the humanities, 28 specializing in the sciences and 7 specializing in art. As of the 2015/16 academic year, specialized studies have been introduced into stage III of general secondary schooling (years 10 and 11), the main characteristic of which is careers guidance. In the classes concerned, certain subjects are studied at a higher level.

128. Citizens who belong to ethnic minorities are entitled to study the native language, culture and traditions of their people. There are four general secondary schools in the country that use ethnic minority languages as the language of teaching: two use Polish and two use Lithuanian.

129. Provision has been made for the education of children with special physical or psychological needs in general secondary and preschool facilities, and around 70 per cent of such children are integrated in general secondary education institutions.

130. In the vocational education system, all educational levels are integrated with each other. Students who receive their education free of charge are assigned their first job on graduation; self-funded students may also choose to be assigned their first job.

131. Most higher education institutions in Belarus are universities. There are 45 State and 9 private universities. There are 383 students per 10,000 population. Particular attention is paid to ensuring equal educational opportunities for young people from urban and rural areas.

132. Under the Education Code, the right to education is ensured through a system of loans for self-funded students.

133. Pupils have broad opportunities to develop their creative abilities and to take part in various types of sport. One in two pupils attends an establishment providing supplementary education for children and young people. Belarus has 320 supplementary education institutions for children and young people and 442 supplementary cultural institutions.

134. Foreign nationals and stateless persons permanently resident in Belarus and persons with refugee status have the same rights as Belarusian nationals to education at all levels.

135. Under a policy framework and programme for the continuous education of children and young people, a comprehensive system of teaching human rights, including the rights of the child and international humanitarian law, has been established.

136. The core United Nations human rights instruments are widely accessible. A newsletter entitled "Protection and Justice" is devoted to the defence of the rights of the child. A legal website for children (www.mir.pravo.by) has been created. Textbooks on human rights protection are being published for pupils, students and teachers, with

government participation and under international technical assistance projects. The subject of human rights is regularly addressed in the State media.

137. Pursuant to the State Youth Policy Act, provision has been made for the establishment of special services to advise young people about various aspects of human rights and to give them legal assistance.

138. With the assistance of the Government, a Council of Europe information point has been opened at the Belarusian State University. It conducts information campaigns on human rights.

6. The rights of the child

139. Children make up 18.9 per cent of the population of Belarus.

140. The fundamental rights of the child and a system of measures to protect them are established in Belarusian law. Every child has the inalienable right to life, a decent standard of living and healthy development.

141. The law guarantees the physical integrity of the child and his or her protection from all forms of violence and exploitation. Children are entitled to protection of their honour and dignity and protection against any unlawful interference in their privacy. No less important is the child's right to freedom of opinion, belief and expression. The law guarantees the right to receive, hold and disseminate information, as well as the right to protection from information harmful to the child's health or moral and spiritual development.

142. Particular mention must be made of the recognition of children's rights to take action themselves to defend their rights. In the event of their rights being violated, children may apply to commissions on minors' affairs, guardianship and trusteeship bodies, the Procurator's Office and, once they have reached the age of 14, the courts, and they may make use at any time of the assistance of lawyers or other representatives in the courts, without the need for the agreement of their parents, adoptive parents or guardians.

143. The National Commission on the Rights of the Child has been set up in order to ensure compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It monitors the observance of children's rights and lawful interests and has competence to consider individual reports or complaints of violations of children's rights. In essence, it fulfils the role of a national human rights institution for the defence of children's rights. The Commission has authorized representatives throughout the country.

144. As a result of consistent government policy to protect children's rights and interests, the number of children abandoned by their parents fell from 349 in 2005 to 128 in 2014.

145. Active efforts are being put into deinstitutionalization. Since 2005, not only has the number of orphans and children lacking parental care fallen by more than 20 per cent, but also the number of children in residential care has decreased by nearly 60 per cent. Around 80 per cent of orphans are brought up in families.

146. The Government has approved a timetable for improving residential care for orphans. The number of children's homes and boarding schools for orphans fell from 75 in 2005 to 53 in 2010, a drop of 30 per cent, and then to 34 in 2015 (a decrease of 55 per cent compared to the 2005 figure).

147. Children have extensive opportunities for self-expression. There are 27 voluntary associations for children and 270 for young people, which receive organizational and financial support from the State.

148. In order to ensure more effective and comprehensive protection of children's rights, the State actively cooperates with civil society organizations.

7. Women's rights

149. Belarus has made significant progress in regulating the legal, political, economic and cultural aspects of equality between men and women. One of the priorities of government policy embodied in the Constitution and other laws and regulations is to ensure that men and women have equal opportunities to exercise their equal rights and freedoms.

150. In 2000, the National Council on Gender Policy was set up to coordinate action to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It comprises representatives of government bodies and civil society. A revised version of the guidelines on the National Council on Gender Policy, under the Council of Ministers, was approved in 2012 and new members were appointed in 2013.

151. In order to create the conditions necessary to ensure equal opportunities for both sexes, a national plan of action for gender equality for 2011-2015 has been adopted; it is the fourth successive programme document on this subject.

152. More than 30 women's voluntary associations are in operation, forming an active element in civil society. Their range of activities includes legal education, support for women's career development and for the instilling of healthy lifestyle habits, assistance to victims of violence, the prevention of violence and trafficking in women, and assistance to orphans.

153. Women's participation in the legislature, the executive branch and the judiciary is steadily increasing. Since the mid-1990s, the number of women deputies has risen more than sevenfold, from 4.5 to 32.8 per cent. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Belarus is one of the leading countries as far as the representation of women in Parliament is concerned. Women hold 20.2 per cent of leader or deputy leader positions in national government bodies. They also make up 57.1 per cent of judges. The number of women students in higher education is 57.5 per cent. Women constitute 27 per cent of all deputies in the fifth House of Representatives and make up 35 per cent in the Council of the Republic. A total of 46.3 per cent of the local council deputies elected in 2014 are women.

154. The State pays particular attention to protection of the rights of mothers. The law guarantees the right to paid maternity leave and childcare leave for women with children under the age of 3. The woman's job is kept for her during that time. A parent bringing up three or more children under the age of 16 or a disabled child under the age of 18 is entitled to one additional day of leave per week, paid at the rate of the average daily wage.

155. According to the 2014 Human Development Report, Belarus is one of the top 16 countries in the world where the female Human Development Index is equal to or exceeds that for men. It also comes twenty-eighth out of 152 countries and first among the CIS countries on the gender equality development index.

8. The rights of ethnic minorities

156. People from around 140 ethnic groups live in the territory of Belarus.

157. There is no history of clashes or conflicts on ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic or religious grounds in Belarus. The Belarusian Government's consistent policy aimed at the free development and promotion of diverse cultures, languages, traditions and religions is a major factor in ensuring stable relations between ethnic groups.

158. Inter-ethnic and interreligious relations are regulated by the Ethnic Minorities Act and the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations Act.

159. Implementation of the right to freedom of conscience and religion and support for the ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity of ethnic minorities living in Belarus fall within the competence of a government body specially set up for this purpose: the Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs.

160. In Belarus, there are over 200 voluntary organizations representing 26 ethnic and cultural communities. Of these organizations, 32 have international and national status. The cultural and educational events organized by ethnic and cultural associations and the activities of cultural institutions set up by national community associations are financed from the government budget.

161. Within cultural institutions, there are 66 weekend schools where some 5,000 members of ethnic communities study their mother tongue: Afghans, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Germans, Greeks, Jews, Koreans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Moldovans, Poles, Roma, Tatars, Turks and Ukrainians. In cooperation with the countries of historic origin, educational bodies with an ethnocultural component supply appropriate teaching material. Newspapers are published in Polish, Ukrainian and Lithuanian, and radio and television programmes are broadcast in those languages.

162. With a view to bolstering religious and cultural pluralism and tolerance in Belarusian society, a government programme for 2011-2015 is being implemented to develop the religious sphere, inter-ethnic relations and cooperation with compatriots abroad.

163. In 2014, the Belarusians Abroad Act was adopted to promote solidarity between Belarusians throughout the world, help them maintain their ethnic and cultural identity and strengthen their ties with their homeland.

164. The Inter-Ethnic Advisory Council, comprising representatives of more than 20 ethnic groups, has been set up within the Office of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs to formulate recommendations on government policy to support ethnic minorities.

165. Belarusian legislation permits citizens to fully enjoy the right to freedom of conscience and religion and religious organizations to operate fully. All faiths are equal before the law. Citizens of Belarus who are liable to compulsory military or reserve service and fit for it in terms of their health and physical development may be sent for alternative service in line with the Alternative Service Act because of their religious convictions.

166. Between 1988 and 2015, the number of religious organizations expanded from 765 communities of 8 faiths to 3,487 religious communities and 173 religious organizations representing 26 faiths and religions, including the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish faiths.

167. Registered religious organizations are exempt from income tax, land tax and tax on immovable property, including religious buildings under construction. In Belarus, there are 2,618 religious buildings in use and approximately 245 under construction. The State grants assistance to religious organizations for the restoration of religious buildings and other items of historical or cultural value.

168. The State regards the activities of religious organizations as a vital contribution to preserving civil peace and social harmony and improving public morality.

169. The State supports the initiatives of religious organizations to support and promote interfaith dialogue on the basis of respect for human rights. International conferences on fostering constructive dialogue between religions and faiths are regularly held under the auspices of the State.

170. Belarus participates in several multilateral initiatives under the auspices of the United Nations to foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace. In 2009, the country joined the prestigious international initiative known as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

171. Belarus provides a forum for exchange of best experience in combating all forms of intolerance. In June 2013, in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), it organized a regional seminar on combating racial discrimination. In September 2014, together with OHCHR, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and other partners, it held a seminar on combating incitement to hatred, xenophobia and intolerance in cyberspace.

172. Belarusian law is regularly updated with a view to fulfilling the country's international obligations with regard to migrants, including asylum seekers. The Act on the Legal Status of Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in Belarus, the Act on the Granting of Refugee Status and Subsidiary and Temporary Protection to Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in Belarus and the External Labour Migration Act are all currently in force.

173. These Acts, which were drawn up with the active participation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), enshrine the rights and freedoms of foreign nationals and stateless persons present in the territory of Belarus.

174. Belarus signed and ratified the Convention of CIS Member States on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which reproduces the core provisions of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

175. An effective national system of asylum has been set up and the necessary conditions have been created for the integration into society of persons who have been granted refugee status and the restoration to them of respect and human dignity.

176. As at 1 October 2015, more than 5,700 foreigners from 59 States had applied for refugee status or subsidiary protection in Belarus. Refugee status had been granted to 910 foreigners resident in Belarus and 167 refugees had been granted Belarusian citizenship. Subsidiary protection had been granted to 1,006 foreign nationals in the country.

177. Foreigners who have been granted subsidiary protection in Belarus enjoy rights on a par with foreigners who are temporarily resident in Belarus. They are also entitled to legal protection on the same basis as citizens, to medical services and employment on the same basis as foreign nationals permanently resident in the country. They have the right to family reunion and to residence in temporary accommodation if they are not able to live independently. Foreign minors who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection have the same right as their Belarusian peers to preschool and general secondary education, as well as to medical services.

178. Foreigners who may not be expelled because of the State's international obligations have the right to obtain a temporary residence permit and accordingly to enjoy the rights granted to other foreign nationals who have such a permit.

179. Every year some 400 foreigners receive targeted humanitarian, financial, medical, social and legal assistance. Temporary accommodation centres for persons applying for refugee status or subsidiary protection have been set up and are operating successfully in Brest, Viciebsk and Homiel. Each centre can accommodate 68 persons at a time.

9. Protection of victims of trafficking in persons

180. Belarus, as a party to all the international instruments on combating contemporary forms of slavery and the slave trade, has made combating trafficking in persons a priority of government policy.

181. Measures have been adopted to further improve legislation to combat human trafficking. The Human Trafficking Act came into force in July 2012, systematizing the provisions of previous Acts on the subject. It was amended in 2014 to include provisions on the identification of victims of trafficking and their referral for rehabilitation, and give them a 30-day period for rehabilitation before they have to decide whether to apply to the law enforcement agencies. Council of Ministers Order No. 485 was adopted on 11 June 2015, approving instructions for the identification of victims of trafficking, the procedure for completion and the form of questionnaires for persons who may have suffered from human trafficking or related offences, the procedure for presentation of the information contained therein. Amendments were also made to the Criminal Code in 2005, 2008 and 2015.

182. There are currently six elements of offences involving trafficking in persons and related acts. The maximum punishment under the Criminal Code is deprivation of liberty for up to 15 years with confiscation of property. The concept of a "victim of trafficking in persons" is laid down in the law.

183. In 2013, Belarus acceded to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Belarus is the only country that is not a member State of the Council of Europe to have acceded to that Convention.

184. Belarus has implemented three comprehensive government programmes to combat trafficking in persons. Over the same period, acting in conjunction with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and other specialized international organizations, it has dismantled 22 criminal organizations, including 21 international ones, and 85 criminal gangs. A total of 2,309 persons have been prosecuted, of whom 820 received custodial sentences. It was found that 5,202 people had been victims of trafficking.

185. The Government, together with international organizations and community associations, has put in place a scheme for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of victims of trafficking in persons. The law makes provision for the following types of free government assistance for victims of trafficking in persons:

- Provision of temporary accommodation, including board and lodging;
- Legal assistance, including free legal aid;
- Medical care and counselling;
- Tracing of the families of victims of trafficking who are minors or placement of such victims in a foster family or children's home;
- Assistance to victims in finding a permanent job;
- Financial support.

186. There are 135 social adjustment and rehabilitation units incorporating 107 crisis centres intended for the provision of assistance to victims of various forms of violence, including trafficking in persons. IOM sponsors a specialized rehabilitation unit. A total of 21 non-governmental organizations are also engaged in assisting with the reintegration of victims of trafficking in persons.

187. A victim may be awarded damages by a court in criminal proceedings.

188. In 2007, Belarus set up an international centre for training, in-service training and retraining in migration affairs and combating trafficking in persons. In 2008, the centre was

recognized as a benchmark training institution of the CIS Member States. Courses are regularly held at the centre for representatives of the law enforcement agencies of various States, and a large number of international human rights events take place there. Over 1,500 persons from almost 30 States have studied at the centre, which has partnerships with IOM, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and OHCHR.

189. In 2009, Belarus was visited by the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, of the United Nations Human Rights Council. At the end of the visit, the Special Rapporteur commended the Government's efforts to combat trafficking in persons at the national and international levels.

190. Belarus is a recognized leader in promoting action at the United Nations to combat contemporary forms of slavery. At the 2005 World Summit, Belarus proposed that international efforts to counter trafficking in persons should be stepped up and that a global partnership should be formed against slavery and trafficking in persons in the twenty-first century. Since then, the General Assembly of the United Nations, acting on the initiative of Belarus, has adopted many different resolutions aimed at improving the coordination and effectiveness of international efforts to curb trafficking.

191. At the initiative of Belarus, in 2010, the General Assembly adopted the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, which sets out the international community's comprehensive and coordinated approach to combating trafficking, including through protection of the rights of victims, primarily women and children. As part of the implementation of the Plan, the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, has been established. Belarus was one of the first countries to make a voluntary contribution to the Fund.

192. As a result of a resolution adopted, at the initiative of Belarus, by the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-eighth session, 30 July has been made World Day against Trafficking in Persons, and has been marked every year since 2014. In May 2014, at the twenty-third session of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Belarus initiated a resolution on preventing and combating trafficking in human organs and trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal.

10. The right to freedom of expression

193. Freedom of speech, freedom of the media and the prohibition of censorship — fundamental values that are embodied in the Constitution — have become part of the country's legal standards.

194. In 1993, 627 print media titles were published in Belarus. As of October 2015, their number had risen to 1,583, 62 per cent of which were not owned by the State (1,152 non-State-owned compared to 431 State-owned). More than 3,500 foreign newspapers and magazines are in free circulation and 207 foreign television channels are transmitted. There are nine news agencies, of which seven are not owned by the State. Of the 273 television and radio stations in the country, 190 (149 radio programmes and 41 television programmes) are government-owned and 83 (24 radio programmes and 59 television programmes) are non-government-owned.

195. The Media Act, which establishes the legal arrangements for the independent professional activities of the media, was drawn up with account taken of recommendations made by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe. The Act, inter alia, significantly expands citizens' access to various kinds of information and simplifies the procedure for setting up media outlets.

196. Legislation lays down the categories of information whose dissemination by the media is prohibited. They include information advocating war, extremist activities, violence, cruelty and the use of drugs.

197. Interference with the professional independence of editorial staff in the media is prohibited. Violating journalists' rights or coercing them to disseminate or not to disseminate information is also prohibited.

198. Monopolization of the media by government bodies, political parties, other voluntary associations or other legal entities or natural persons is prohibited.

199. In Belarus, the law establishes and in practice secures the same economic conditions for the development of all media, irrespective of their form of ownership.

200. A public coordinating council for the media has been set up; it serves to promote dialogue between government bodies and the non-governmental sector on topical issues relating to the development of the Belarusian media.

201. Belarus actively cooperates with international human rights mechanisms and procedures with regard to the media.

202. In 1998, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression visited Belarus at the invitation of the Government. In 2007, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media also visited the country. In 2008, two seminars on the freedom of the media were held in Belarus under the auspices of OSCE; they were attended by representatives of government bodies and civil society.

11. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association

203. The Constitution guarantees the freedom to organize assemblies, rallies, marches, demonstrations and pickets that do not breach law and order or violate the rights of other citizens. The basic principle when holding public events is to ensure public safety and law and order.

204. Legislation based on the principles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees the right to freedom of association. Political parties and other voluntary associations are guaranteed freedom to act in accordance with their statutes and programmes. Legislation prohibits the abolition of political parties and voluntary associations on political grounds. There is a ban on the establishment and activities of non-governmental organizations and political parties whose purpose is to advocate war or extremist activity, or to incite social, ethnic, religious or racial hatred.

205. Belarus currently has 15 political parties, 1,126 party organizations and around 2,600 voluntary associations in various fields, including 302 for young people, 112 ethnic minority associations, 87 associations for veterans and persons disabled as a result of war or work injuries, 83 scientific associations, 49 creative associations and 30 women's associations. An Act amending legislation on the activities of political parties and other voluntary organizations was adopted on 4 November 2013 and came into force in 2014. It simplified the rules governing the establishment of voluntary organizations and, in particular, reduced the requirements that the founding members of such organizations should be representative of the territorial units of the country.

206. Moreover, the steadily rising number of voluntary associations is evidence of the public's civic engagement and of the opportunities available for exercising it.

207. The State Youth Policy Act established additional guarantees of freedom of association for young people.

208. National legislation on trade unions takes account of the provisions of the ILO conventions ratified by Belarus concerning freedom of association.

209. Belarusian citizens are entitled to establish trade unions of their choice and to join trade unions, provided that they comply with their statutes.

210. Trade unions may, on a voluntary basis, establish or join national unions, associations or other organizations that enjoy the rights of trade unions.

211. Trade unions independently draft and approve their own statutes, determine their structure, elect their governing bodies, organize their own activities and hold assemblies, conferences, plenums and congresses.

212. Trade unions, in accordance with their statutory aims and objectives, have the right to cooperate with the trade unions of other countries and, if they so choose, join international and other trade union associations and organizations.

213. One of the priorities of the country's social and economic policy is to improve and develop the system of social partnership and forms and methods of cooperation between trade unions or trade union associations, employers or their associations and government bodies.

214. Trade unions participate in the formulation and implementation of the Government's social and economic policy and are entitled to make proposals to government bodies on improvements to labour and socioeconomic legislation and to carry out public scrutiny of employers' compliance with legislation governing labour, labour protection and trade unions and the fulfilment of collective contracts and agreements.

215. In implementation of their statutory objectives, trade unions are entitled to organize rallies, marches, demonstrations and other collective action, in accordance with the law, to defend the interests of their members.

216. As at 1 April 2015, there were 37 registered trade unions in Belarus (33 national trade unions, 1 local trade union and 3 trade unions in organizations), 22,881 trade union organizational structures and 4 unions (associations) of trade unions. During the first three months of 2015, a total of 183 new trade union organizational structures were registered (added to the list) in Belarus.

217. Councils on labour and social affairs are permanent bodies in the social partnership system at the sectoral and local levels. There are currently 22 sectoral and 300 local councils.

218. One form of social partnership is collective bargaining for the purpose of concluding agreements and collective contracts. Agreements are concluded at the national level (general agreements), the sectoral level (rate agreements) and the local level (local agreements).

219. As at 1 October 2015, there was 1 general agreement, 47 sectoral agreements, 517 local agreements and 18,210 collective contracts in force in Belarus.

12. The right to freedom and privacy

220. Belarusian law establishes a number of guarantees against arbitrary detention.

221. Detention may be employed as a preventive measure only where a person is suspected of, or charged with, committing a crime that is punishable by law with deprivation of liberty for more than 2 years, except in the case of less serious offences against the procedure governing the implementation of economic activities (other than contraband, illegal export or transmission for purposes of export of items subject to export controls, and the legalization ("laundering") of proceeds of crime). In exceptional cases,

this form of preventive measure may be imposed on a person suspected or accused of a less serious offence against the procedure governing the implementation of economic activities or an offence punishable by law with less than 2 years' deprivation of liberty, where the person does not have a permanent place of residence in Belarus or his or her identity has not been established. A judicial review of the legality of and grounds for the use or extension of detention of a suspect or accused person is one of the constitutional guarantees that ensures the freedom, inviolability and dignity of the human person.

222. Administrative detention may be imposed where a person has committed an administrative offence. The right of the individual to inform his or her family, close relatives and lawyer of his or her whereabouts within three hours is guaranteed. The procedure for and conditions of detention of a natural person who has been placed in administrative detention for more than 3 hours are laid down by the Council of Ministers.

223. Detainees have the right to a lawyer. Foreign nationals or stateless persons who are detained after committing an administrative offence must be informed promptly, in a language which they understand, of the grounds for their detention and of their rights.

224. The law establishes additional guarantees that the rights of the child will be taken into account when decisions are made as to the imposition of preventive measures on juvenile suspects or defendants: it provides for the possibility of minors being given into the supervision of their parents, adoptive parents, guardians, custodians or other trustworthy persons.

225. In 2004, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention visited Belarus and welcomed the Government's endeavours to improve the legal and judicial system. Since that visit, Belarus has submitted two reports to the Working Group to inform it of progress in implementing its recommendations.

13. The right to life

226. In matters of legislation concerning the regulation and imposition of the death penalty, Belarus strictly follows the recommendations embodied in the relevant articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The death penalty is not imposed on persons whose crimes were committed when they were under the age of 18, women, men who have reached the age of 65 at the time of sentencing or persons who have committed an offence and meet the conditions provided for in a pretrial agreement on cooperation.

227. The law explicitly provides that the death penalty is to be imposed only in exceptional cases and is on the statute book only temporarily.

228. Life imprisonment is imposed increasingly frequently as an alternative to the death penalty in Belarus.

229. In Belarus, there has been a steady decline in the number of death sentences handed down, from 47 in 1998 to 9 in the period from 2010 to 2014. All persons sentenced to death have the right to appeal to the President of the Republic for mercy. If mercy is granted, the death penalty may be replaced by a sentence of life imprisonment.

230. In 1996, a national referendum was held on the abolition of the death penalty. More than 80 per cent of the population voted in favour of retaining this form of criminal punishment.

231. The necessity of abolishing the death penalty is, however, being actively discussed at all levels. Civil society is playing an active part in this campaign, which enjoys the support of the country's leaders. A round table was held in Minsk in June 2013 on the topic

of religion and the death penalty. Representatives of government structures, the clergy, NGOs and other persons took part.

14. The right to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal

232. The Constitution guarantees the legal protection of all the rights and freedoms it offers. No one may be found guilty of a crime and punished unless he or she has been lawfully sentenced by a court.

233. The presumption of innocence, which is embodied in Belarusian law, serves as an important guarantee of the accused's right of defence.

234. Persons taking part in a court hearing who have no or insufficient command of the language in which the proceedings are taking place are guaranteed the right to the services of an interpreter free of charge.

235. The right of defence encompasses the possibility for the suspect or accused to receive qualified legal assistance at any time, freely to consult his or her defence counsel and to appeal against the sentence. Legal assistance is granted free of charge in cases specified by the law.

236. There are no time limits on a review under the supervisory procedure of a sentence that has become enforceable. A sentence may be reviewed under the supervisory procedure within one year of its becoming enforceable where the law in respect of a more serious crime needs to be applied because of the leniency of the punishment or on other grounds that would be detrimental to the situation of the convicted person.

237. Measures to speed up court procedure (e.g. transferring unchallenged civil cases of civil debt recovery to notaries, the introduction of a mediation system, etc.) mean that the number of civil cases heard by the ordinary courts in 2014 fell by almost 35 per cent compared to 2010. As a result of these hearings, the courts defended the most important rights of applicants: 172 persons who had been unlawfully dismissed were reinstated, and the courts upheld 12,000 claims regarding breaches of housing rights, 91 applications for compensation for harm to the life and health of citizens, 2,541 claims regarding the protection of consumer rights and 141 claims regarding the protection of applicants' honour, dignity or business reputation. A total of 94.6 per cent of those claims were upheld.

238. In 2000, at the Government's invitation, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers visited Belarus to assess legislation and court practice in respect of law enforcement.

D. Reporting process at the national level

239. Belarus strives to fulfil its obligations to the international treaty bodies in full, including by submitting periodic reports on the implementation of the core international human rights instruments.

240. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the country's obligations to the international treaty bodies.

241. In 2010 and 2015, Belarus underwent universal periodic reviews before the United Nations Human Rights Council. In both cases, Belarus accepted most of the recommendations made and endeavoured to implement them.

242. Between 2011 and 2014, the country's periodic reports were considered by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Committee against Torture, the Committee on the Elimination of

Racial Discrimination and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A report will be submitted to the Human Rights Committee in 2015-2016. Belarus will thus have met its reporting obligations to the United Nations treaty bodies.

243. Periodic reports are prepared on the basis of documentation from the Ministries of Labour and Social Welfare, Education, Health, Internal Affairs, Justice, Information, Emergency Situations and Defence; the National Statistical Committee; the Supreme Court; the Procurator General's Office; the National Centre for Legislation and Legal Research; and voluntary associations.

244. Draft reports are subject to a process of approval involving all interested ministries and voluntary associations and, within the scope of their competence, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child and the National Council on Gender Policy. The Government gives final approval. Once approved, draft reports are posted in Russian on the website of the relevant ministry.

245. Approved periodic reports are submitted to the relevant human rights treaty body for consideration.

III. Information on non-discrimination and equality and effective remedies

246. Under the Constitution, all persons are equal before the law and entitled without discrimination to equal protection of their rights and lawful interests (art. 22). This right is guaranteed to all citizens irrespective of their origin, race, ethnicity, nationality, social or financial status, gender, language, education, attitude to religion, place of residence, state of health or other circumstances.

247. The principle of equality of citizens before the law and the prohibition of discrimination is embodied in sector-specific legislation regulating personal, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the Labour Code, the Marriage and Family Code, the Education Code, the Civil Code, the Criminal Code, the Rights of the Child Act, the State Youth Policy Act and the Citizens' and Legal Entities' Appeals Act.

248. With a view to preventing discrimination in all its forms, the Anti-Extremism Act establishes a definition of extremism and prohibits activity by political parties, other voluntary associations, religious or other organizations, or by citizens of Belarus, foreign nationals or stateless persons connected with the planning, organization, preparation or commission of acts aimed, inter alia, at inciting racial, ethnic or religious hatred or discord or social discord involving violence or incitement to violence; demeaning ethnic honour and dignity; organizing and carrying out riots or acts of hooliganism or vandalism motivated by racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity, political or ideological enmity, or hatred or enmity towards any social group; promoting exclusivity or the superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude to religion or their social, racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic identity; or promoting, publicly displaying, producing or disseminating Nazi symbols or paraphernalia.

249. The Media Act guarantees respect for the human rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens in the media (art. 4) and prohibits the dissemination of information aimed at advocating war, violence, cruelty or extremist activity or containing incitements to such activity (art. 38).

250. Under article 7 of the Political Parties Act and article 7 of the Voluntary Associations Act, the establishment and activities of political parties and unions whose purpose is to advocate war or extremist activity are prohibited.

251. The Code of Administrative Offences and the Criminal Code establish liability for the commission of a number of acts motivated by racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity.

252. Specifically, under article 9.22 of the Code of Administrative Offences, public insult, denigration of State languages or other ethnic languages, obstruction or restriction of their use, and the incitement of hatred on linguistic grounds are classed as administrative offences.

253. In addition, under article 7.3 (1) (6), of the Code of Administrative Offences, where an administrative offence is motivated by racial, ethnic or religious enmity, this is an aggravating circumstance.

254. The commission of an offence on grounds of racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity, political or ideological enmity, or on grounds of hatred or enmity against a social group is also considered an aggravating circumstance under criminal law (Criminal Code, art. 64 (1) (9)).

255. Belarusian law also establishes criminal liability for offences against constitutional human and civil rights and freedoms, in particular violations of citizens' equal rights (Criminal Code, art. 190). This article of the Criminal Code establishes liability for any intentional direct or indirect violation or restriction of rights and freedoms or the establishment of direct or indirect advantages for citizens on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, language, origin, financial or official status, place of residence, attitude to religion, beliefs or membership of voluntary associations resulting in substantial harm to the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizens.

256. In addition, the Criminal Code establishes liability for the incitement of racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity (art. 130) and for a number of offences motivated by racial, ethnic or religious hatred or enmity, political or ideological enmity, or hatred or enmity towards any social group, such as genocide (art. 127), crimes against the security of humankind (art. 128), murder (art. 139 (2) (14)) and intentional grievous bodily harm (art. 147 (2) (8)).

257. Clear legal mechanisms and procedures for the protection of human rights that meet modern global standards have been established in Belarus. Under article 61 of the Constitution, everyone has the right, in accordance with the international legal instruments ratified by Belarus, to have recourse to international organizations for the defence of his or her rights and freedoms, provided that all available domestic remedies have been exhausted.

258. Under the national security policy framework, conditions conducive to ethnic, religious, racial or political discrimination or intolerance are not present in Belarus. Individual manifestations of such discrimination or intolerance are atypical, isolated incidents.